

The Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters Study (TASA): Predictors of Suicidal Events in an Open Treatment Trial

DAVID A. BRENT, M.D., LAURENCE L. GREENHILL, M.D., SCOTT COMPTON, Ph.D.,
GRAHAM EMSLIE, M.D., KAREN WELLS, Ph.D., JOHN T. WALKUP, M.D.,
BENEDETTO VITIELLO, M.D., OSCAR BUKSTEIN, M.D., BARBARA STANLEY, Ph.D.,
KELLY POSNER, Ph.D., BETSY D. KENNARD, Psy.D., MARY F. CWIK, Ph.D.,
ANN WAGNER, Ph.D., BARBARA COFFEY, M.D., JOHN S. MARCH, M.D., MARK RIDDLE, M.D.,
TINA GOLDSTEIN, Ph.D., JOHN CURRY, Ph.D., SHANNON BARNETT, M.D.,
LISA CAPASSO, B.A., JAMIE ZELAZNY, B.S.N., M.P.H., JENNIFER HUGHES, B.A.,
SA SHEN, Ph.D., S. SONIA GUGGA, M.S., AND J. BLAKE TURNER, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the predictors of suicidal events and attempts in adolescent suicide attempters with depression treated in an open treatment trial. **Method:** Adolescents who had made a recent suicide attempt and had unipolar depression ($n = 124$) were either randomized ($n = 22$) or given a choice ($n = 102$) among three conditions. Two participants withdrew before treatment assignment. The remaining 124 youths received a specialized psychotherapy for suicide attempting adolescents ($n = 17$), a medication algorithm ($n = 14$), or the combination ($n = 93$). The participants were followed up 6 months after intake with respect to rate, timing, and predictors of a suicidal event (attempt or acute suicidal ideation necessitating emergency referral). **Results:** The morbid risks of suicidal events and attempts on 6-month follow-up were 0.19 and 0.12, respectively, with a median time to event of 44 days. Higher self-rated depression, suicidal ideation, family income, greater number of previous suicide attempts, lower maximum lethality of previous attempt, history of sexual abuse, and lower family cohesion predicted the occurrence, and earlier time to event, with similar findings for the outcome of attempts. A slower decline in suicidal ideation was associated with the occurrence of a suicidal event. **Conclusions:** In this open trial, the 6-month morbid risks for suicidal events and for reattempts were lower than those in other comparable samples, suggesting that this intervention should be studied further. Important treatment targets include suicidal ideation, family cohesion, and sequelae of previous abuse. Because 40% of events occurred with 4 weeks of intake, an emphasis on safety planning and increased therapeutic contact early in treatment may be warranted. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2009;48(10):987–996. **Key Words:** suicide attempt, depression, pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy. Clinical trial registration information—Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters (TASA). URL: <http://clinicaltrials.gov>. Unique identifier: NCT00080158.

Accepted June 26, 2009.

This article was reviewed under and accepted by Ad Hoc Editor Garry Walter, M.D., Ph.D.

Drs. Vitiello and Wagner are with the National Institute of Mental Health; Drs. Brent, Bukstein, and Goldstein and Ms. Zelazny are with the University of Pittsburgh, Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic; Drs. Greenhill, Stanley, Posner, and Turner and Ms. Shen, Ms. Guggia, and Ms. Capasso are with the Columbia University–New York Psychiatric Institute; Drs. Emslie and Kennard and Ms. Hughes are with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas; Drs. Wells, Compton, March, and Curry are with the Duke University Medical Center; Dr. Coffey is with the New York University Child Study Center; and Drs. Walkup, Cwik, and Riddle and Ms. Barnett are with Johns Hopkins University.

Funded by the National Institute of Mental Health through cooperative agreement grants MH66750 (Duke University Medical Center), MH66769

(Johns Hopkins University), MH66762 (New York State Psychiatric Institute), MH66775 (University of Pittsburgh), and MH66778 (University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center).

The opinions and assertions contained in this article are the private views of the authors and are not to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institutes of Health, or the Department of Health and Human Services.

This article is the subject of an editorial by Dr. Garry Walter in this issue.

Correspondence to David Brent, M.D., Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 3811 O'Hara Street, Room 311 Bellefield Towers, Pittsburgh, PA 15213; e-mail: brentda@upmc.edu.

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DOI: 10.1097/CHI.0b013e3181b5dbe4

Suicidal behavior in adolescents is a major public health problem because of its frequency, likelihood for recurrence, health care costs, and increased risk for completed suicide.¹ Despite progress in the identification of risk factors for attempted and completed suicide, there are no interventions that have been shown to reliably decrease the risk for reattempt in adolescents who make an initial suicide attempt.¹ The development of interventions to decrease the risk for reattempt in high-risk patient populations has been identified as a national imperative.²

The development of a treatment for adolescent suicide attempters presents several challenges. First, adolescent suicide attempters often present with multiple problems, such as depression and other comorbid psychiatric conditions, health risk behaviors, and family discord, but there is no extant empirical method for determining which domains are the most salient targets for intervention.^{1,3,4} Second, it is difficult in the context of a clinical trial to demonstrate the prevention of suicide reattempts, except in large samples that are enriched with high-risk individuals. Third, investigators have been reluctant to conduct any type of experimental research with suicidal individuals because of concern about the risk for completed suicide, yet progress in the clinical management of suicidal individuals is impossible without impanelling such patients into clinical trials.^{2,5}

In light of these concerns, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and five academic medical centers, under the auspices of the Research Units on Pediatric Psychopharmacology (RUPP), developed the Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters (TASA) study. The TASA group developed a combined psychosocial and pharmacological treatment protocol and tested it in a 6-month trial in 124 adolescent suicide attempters with depression. Adolescents with both depression and a recent suicide attempt were studied because depressed suicide attempters are at especially high risk for a recurrent attempt.⁶⁻⁸ The goals of the trial were to establish the feasibility and acceptability of the intervention and to identify factors that predict or mediate the recurrence of suicidal behavior, to further refine this intervention for use in a randomized clinical trial.

We describe, in a sample of adolescent suicide attempters with depression, the risk and time to occurrence of a suicidal event and the baseline predictors thereof. Suicidal events include suicide attempts, as well as high levels of suicidal ideation that necessitate an emer-

gency evaluation or a change in treatment plan.⁵ The identification of factors associated with recurrent suicidal behavior can aid in the selection of samples at high enough risk to be able to detect an intervention effect and also can help to identify and prioritize salient treatment targets for the prevention of further suicidal episodes.

Predictors of recurrent suicidal behavior in suicide attempters, although well studied in clinical and epidemiological samples, have not been examined in adolescents with depression who have been systematically assessed and treated. With literature as our basis, we predict that the risk for recurrent suicidal behavior and suicidal events will be increased in those with greater number of previous attempts; higher suicidal intent and lethality of the index attempt; higher intake suicidal ideation; presence and severity of a mood and anxiety disorders; comorbid disruptive disorder or substance abuse; and higher hopelessness, impulsivity, emotional lability, impulsive aggression, and family adversity.^{1,3,4,6-8}

We further hypothesize that, among putative treatment targets (e.g., suicidal ideation, self-reported depression), those with recurrent suicidal events and behavior will show less change over time than those who emerged from treatment without experiencing another suicidal event.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were adolescents aged 12 to 18 years who had made a suicide attempt within 90 days of intake. A suicide attempt was defined as a "self-destructive act with explicit or inferred intent to die."⁹ The participants were required to have a major unipolar mood disorder (major depression [$n = 106$], dysthymic disorder [$n = 1$], depression not otherwise specified [$n = 4$], or both major depression and dysthymia [$n = 13$]) and had at least moderate symptoms of depression (Children's Depression Rating Scale-Revised ≥ 36). The participants were required to be living with a parent or guardian who could participate in treatment and could not have substance dependence, bipolar disorder, psychosis, or a developmental disorder. A consort chart shows the flow into the study (Fig. 1).

Design

This study was started as a 3-arm randomized trial (Fig. 1). The initial 18 participants were randomized into one of three conditions: psychotherapy, medication management, or the combination. Because of difficulties in recruitment, the design was then modified to allow participants to either be randomized ($n = 4$) or to choose their preferred treatment ($n = 104$). A total of 126 participants initially consented, but two withdrew their consent, and five withdrew before the initiation of treatment, leaving 124 participants with a baseline assessment and 119 who initiated treatment.

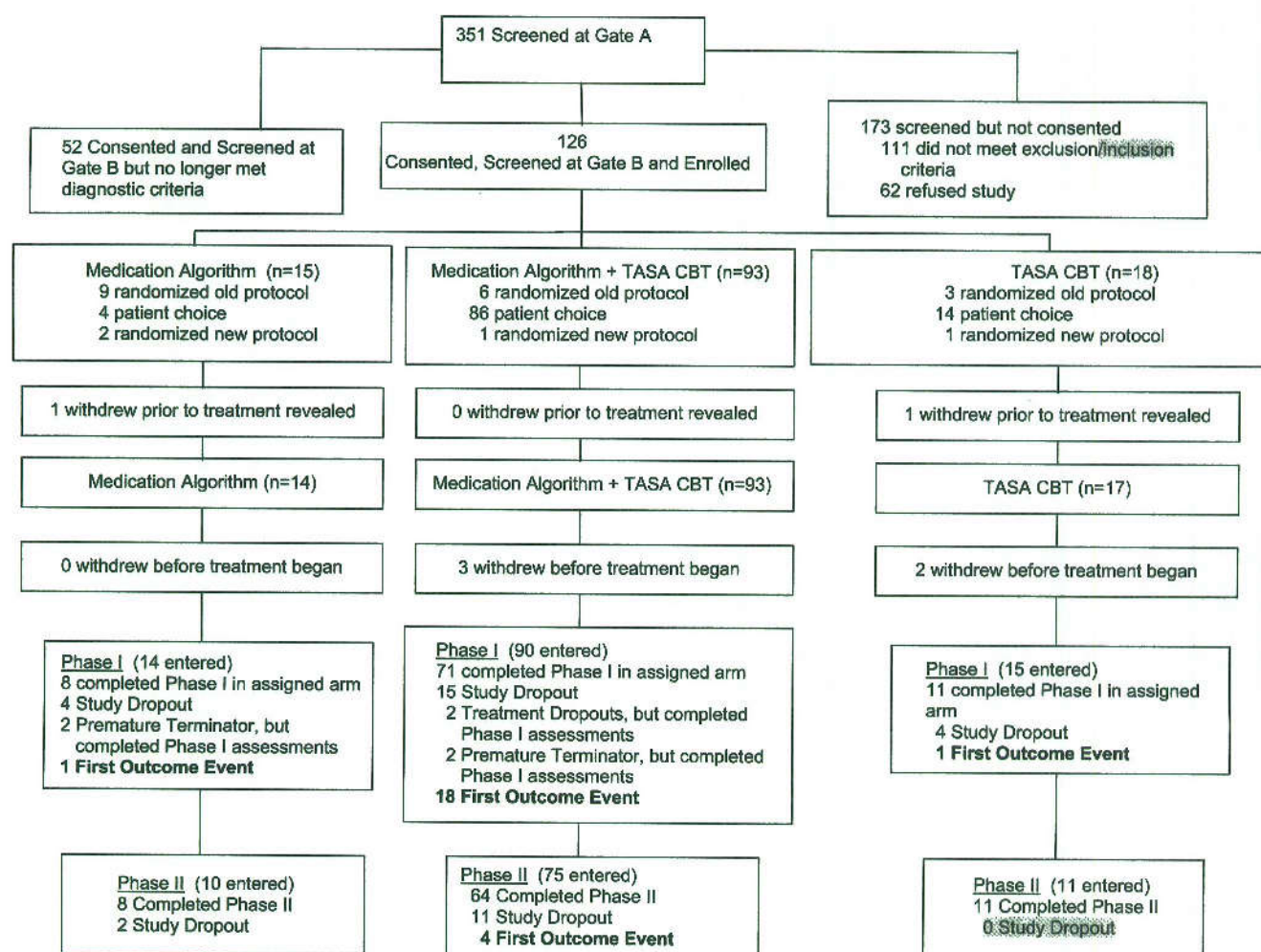


Fig. 1 Consort chart. Premature terminator—the patient needed treatment in addition to or instead of TASA protocol treatments. The TASA assessments continue. Treatment dropout—the patient refused to continue TASA treatments but continued assessments. Study dropout—the patient refused to continue TASA treatments and assessments. Phase I—first 12 weeks of treatment. Phase II—second 12 weeks of treatment. Randomized/old protocol—randomization among medical algorithm, medication algorithm, and TASA CBT. New protocol—the participant could choose to be randomized or select one of the three treatments. CBT = cognitive-behavioral therapy; TASA = Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters.

Treatment

Treatment consisted of a 6-month intervention—a medication algorithm derived from the Texas Medication Algorithm,¹⁰ psychotherapy, or the combination. The psychotherapeutic treatment took as its point of departure a cognitive behavioral treatment for adult suicide attempters¹¹ but was extensively modified to fit the developmental and clinical needs of adolescents with depression and suicidal tendencies. This modification drew heavily from manuals developed for the Treatment of Adolescent Depression Study,^{12,13} Treatment of SSRI-Resistant Depression in Adolescents,^{14,15} and Dialectic Behavior Therapy.¹⁶ The medication algorithm and psychotherapy are described in greater detail in companion publications.^{17,18}

Primary Outcome

The primary outcome for this study was a suicidal event, assessed using the Suicide Severity Rating Scale. A suicide event, defined according to the Columbia Classification Algorithm of Suicide

Assessment and classified by a blinded panel of experts, consisted of one of the following: completed suicide, attempted suicide, preparatory acts toward imminent, suicidal behavior, or suicidal ideation. A suicide attempt was defined as an act of potentially self-injurious behavior with explicit or inferred intent to die.⁹ Suicidal events have been used as an endpoint in other treatment studies of suicidal behavior.^{5,19} Previous cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons have shown that ideators with high intent who seek emergency referral are similar to bona fide attempters on a broad range of clinical characteristics and often make attempts on subsequent follow-up.^{8,20} The impact of these treatments on depression outcomes is the focus of a related article.²¹

Human Subjects Protection

This protocol was approved by all sites' institutional review boards, and informed consent/assent was obtained before entry into the study. Study recruitment and adverse events were reported on a quarterly basis to a data management safety board constituted by the

NIMH. To protect these high-risk participants in this study, we took the following steps: no-shows were vigorously pursued; as per the study manual, each participant had a safety plan developed that includes internal and external coping strategies to be implemented should the participant experience suicidal urges; 24-hour clinical backup at each site was provided; and the participants whose clinical status indicated that they needed a different treatment than that which TASA was providing (e.g., participant was bipolar or was psychotic) were removed, and a referral was facilitated. The occurrence of a suicidal event per se was not a sufficient reason for removal. However, any participant who experienced a suicidal event was required to be evaluated by a designated ombudsperson who was independent of the study team. The role of the ombudsperson was to provide independent clinical evaluation about the appropriateness of a participant's continuing participation in the trial and in their assigned treatment arm after a suicidal event. The ombudsperson's decision was binding.

Assessment

The participants were assessed with regard to suicidality at weeks 6, 12, 18, and 24 after intake. The majority ($n = 96$, 77.4%) were assessed at week 12, with 87 assessed at week 18, and 83 at week 24. Median time of maximum assessment was 85 days (interquartile range 61.5 days). Those followed up for more than median duration, compared with those followed less than the median, had higher income ($t_{1,14} = 3.19$, $p < .002$) but were similar with respect to other baseline predictors of recurrent suicidal events found in this sample.

Baseline characteristics assessed include characteristics of past and index suicidal behavior (intent, lethality, number of previous attempts, age of first attempt) and worst and current level of suicidal ideation, assessed by the Columbia Suicide History Form,²² Beck Suicide Intent Scale,²³ and the Scale for Suicidal Ideation (SSI).²⁴ respectively. The participants were assessed diagnostically using the Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia for School-Age Children, Present and Lifetime Version.²⁵ Characteristics of depression assessed include age of onset, duration, number of previous episodes, and interview-rated and self-reported severity of depression, using the Children's Depression Rating Scale-Revised²⁶ and the Beck Depression Inventory,²⁷ respectively. Hopelessness was assessed using the self-reported Beck Hopelessness Scale,²⁸ anxiety by the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale,²⁹ and tendency to aggression and hostility by the Aggression Questionnaire.³⁰ Emotional lability and impulsivity were assessed using the Emotionality, Activity, Sociability, and Impulsivity Survey³¹ and an interview rating of the number of symptoms for borderline personality disorder. History of maltreatment was rated using the Childhood Experiences Questionnaire,³² and family climate of adaptability and cohesion were rated using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale II.³³

Data Analysis

Analyses were intent to treat, with last observation carried forward. We focus on suicidal events as an outcome and report results specifically for attempts only when they diverge from the findings for suicidal events. The baseline characteristics of those who did or did not experience a suicidal event within 6 months of intake were compared with those who did not using standard univariate parametric and nonparametric statistics. A series of logistic regressions by domain were conducted to identify those baseline characteristics most closely associated with suicidal events. Those variables that emerged from these logistic regressions were then tested one by one with a logistic regression that controlled for age, race, sex, site, parental edu-

cation, living with both biological parents, and household income. Then, the trimmed list of variables were entered and tested by backward stepwise regression with the above-noted covariates forced in to identify the most parsimonious set of variables associated with risk for a suicidal event. Similarly, variables associated with time to suicidal event from entry into the study were tested in a similar fashion using the Kaplan-Meier method, followed by Cox regressions to identify the most parsimonious set of predictors of time to event.

RESULTS

Events and Attempts

Of the 124 participants enrolled in the study, 24 experienced a suicidal event during the 6 months since entry. Of these 24 participants, 15 made at least one suicide reattempt. The small number of suicidal events and reattempts precludes statistical tests comparing types of events, but inspection of the characteristics of reattempts and other types of suicidal events shows similarity on demographic and clinical baseline variables. The hazard of an event and an attempt were 0.19 and 0.12, respectively, with a mean time to suicidal event from intake of 44.0 days (SE 35.6) and mean time to a reattempt of 44.8 days (SE 37.5; Fig. 2). Of the 24 events, 10 occurred within 4 weeks of intake. There was one completed suicide that occurred after a participant had completed treatment, beyond the 6-month window of this article.

Site Differences

The demographic characteristics of the participants were similar with regard to age and sex across sites but differed markedly by race ($\chi^2_{16} = 40.9$, $p < .001$;

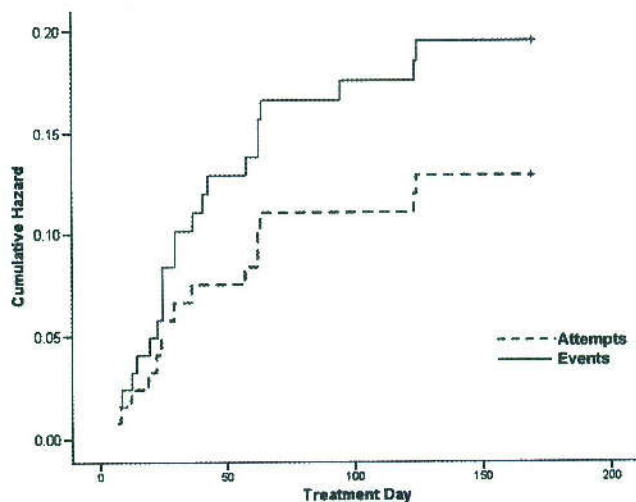


Fig. 2 Time to onset of suicidal events and attempts in TASA. TASA = Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics by Site

| Site | n | Suicidal Events, n (%) ^a | Suicide Attempts, n (%) ^b | Age, mean (SD), y | Sex (Male), n (%) | Race, n (%) | | | |
|-------|-----|--|---|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------|----------|
| | | | | | | White | African American | Hispanic | Other |
| 1 | 16 | 4 (25.0) | 3 (18.8) | 15.1 (1.2) | 5 (31.2) | 11 (68.8) | 3 (18.8) | 1 (6.3) | 1 (6.3) |
| 2 | 25 | 4 (16.0) | 2 (8.0) | 15.4 (1.7) | 5 (20.0) | 18 (72.0) | 6 (24.0) | 1 (4.0) | 0 |
| 3 | 28 | 3 (10.7) | 3 (10.7) | 16.2 (1.6) | 5 (17.9) | 9 (32.1) | 3 (10.7) | 12 (42.8) | 4 (14.4) |
| 4 | 29 | 5 (17.2) | 2 (6.9) | 15.9 (1.5) | 6 (20.7) | 24 (82.8) | 1 (3.4) | 3 (10.3) | 1 (3.4) |
| 5 | 26 | 8 (30.8) | 5 (19.2) | 16.0 (1.4) | 7 (26.9) | 21 (80.8) | 3 (11.5) | 2 (7.7) | 0 |
| Total | 124 | 24 (19.4) | 15 (12.1) | 15.8 (1.5) | 28 (22.6) | 83 (66.9) | 16 (12.9) | 19 (15.3) | 6 (4.8) |

^aSuicide attempt: an act of self-injurious behavior with an inferred or explicit wish to die.

^bSuicidal event: completed suicide, attempted suicide, preparatory behavior toward an imminent attempt, or suicidal ideation.

Table 1). There were no overall site differences with regard to rate or time to suicidal events or reattempts, although there was nearly a threefold site variation in the rate of suicidal events (10.7%–30.8%).

Demographic Characteristics and Suicidal Events

Subsequent suicidal events were not associated with age, race, or ethnic group (Table 2).

Characteristics of Index and Past Histories of Suicidal Behavior

Those who experienced a suicidal event had higher levels of suicidal ideation on the SSI at intake, had a greater number of previous attempts, and a lower maximum lethality among previous attempts, the latter two of which also predicted an attempt (Table 3). Two or more previous attempts and lower maximum lethality of previous attempts predicted early occurrence of suicidal events (Log-rank χ^2 's from 15.6, p 's < .001).

Characteristics of Depressive Disorder and Events

Those participants who experienced an event showed higher self-reported depression (Table 3). There was no relation between experiencing an event and the severity of interview-rated depression, duration of depression, number of interview-rated symptoms, or the symptoms of insomnia or irritability.

Comorbid Diagnoses and Events

There were no significant differences in the overall number of comorbid diagnoses (Table 3), nor were there differences in frequencies of individual comorbid disorders as a function of the occurrence of a suicidal event (data not shown).

Psychological Characteristics

Baseline self-reported hopelessness, number of borderline personality traits, and severity of anxiety were higher in those who experienced a suicidal event. Self-rated

TABLE 2
Demographic Characteristics and Risk of Attempt and Suicidal Events

| | Suicide Attempts, n (%) ^a | | | Suicidal Events, n (%) ^b | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----|-------------------------------------|------------|-----|
| | No | Yes | p | No | Yes | p |
| | n = 109 | n = 15 | | n = 100 | n = 24 | |
| Age, mean (SD), y | 15.8 (1.1) | 15.7 (1) | .81 | 15.7 (1.6) | 16.0 (1.4) | .49 |
| Sex (male), n (%) | 24 (22.0) | 4 (26.7) | .68 | 21 (21.0) | 7 (29.2) | .39 |
| Race/ethnicity, n (%) | | | .98 | | | .65 |
| White | 72 (66.1) | 11 (73.3) | | 65 (65.0) | 18 (75.0) | |
| African American | 14 (12.8) | 2 (13.3) | | 13 (13.0) | 3 (12.5) | |
| Hispanic | 17 (15.6) | 2 (13.3) | | 16 (16.0) | 3 (12.5) | |
| Other | 6 (5.5) | 0 | | 6 (6.0) | 0 | |
| Highest education, mean (SD) | 4.5 (1.2) | 4.3 (1.5) | .46 | 4.5 (1.2) | 4.5 (1.3) | .73 |

^aSuicide attempt: an act of self-injurious behavior with an inferred or explicit wish to die.

^bSuicidal event: completed suicide, attempted suicide, preparatory behavior toward an imminent attempt, or suicidal ideation.

TABLE 3
Clinical Characteristics of Suicidality and Depression^a

| | Suicide Attempts ^b | | | Suicidal Events ^c | | |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------|----------------------|----------|
| | No <i>n</i> = 109 | Yes <i>n</i> = 15 | <i>p</i> | No <i>n</i> = 100 | Yes <i>n</i> = 24 | <i>p</i> |
| Scale for Suicide Ideation (prior), mean (SD) | 23.1 (7.6) | 24.3 | .59 | 23.0 (7.6) | 24.4 (7.3) | .42 |
| Scale for Suicide Ideation (current), ^d mean (SD) | 5.9 (7.3) | 9.5 (10) | <.1 | 5.4 (7.2) | 10.0 (8.8) | .01 |
| No. of previous attempts, ^e mean (SD) | 1.9 (1.9) | 3.8 (3) | .03 | 1.8 (1.6) | 3.8 (3.2) | .007 |
| Hospitalized in the past 6 months, <i>n</i> (%) | 70 (71.4) | 8 (72.7) | .93 | 64 (7.1) | 14 (73.7) | .82 |
| Highest lethality attempt, ^f mean (SD) | 2.5 (1.8) | 1.6 (1.1) | .01 | 2.5 (1.8) | 1.8 (1.2) | .03 |
| Age first attempt, mean (SD), <i>y</i> | 15.1 (2) | 14.2 (2.2) | <.1 | 15.1 (1.9) | 14.4 (2.3) | .13 |
| Suicide Intent Scale, mean (SD) | 17.7 (5.1) | 18.8 (4.6) | .45 | 17.7 (5.1) | 18.6 (5.0) | .45 |
| CDRS-R, mean (SD) | 49.6 (12.1) | 54.9 (15) | .14 | 49.5 (11.2) | 53.1 (13.1) | .21 |
| BDI, ^g mean (SD) | 21.6 (12.6) | 33.6 (12.2) | .001 | 20.7 (12.5) | 32.4 (11.3) | .001 |
| Duration of depression, mean (SD) | 57.1 (57.2) | 73.9 (45.7) | .28 | 55.3 (56.1) | 76.2 (53.3) | .12 |
| No. of symptoms of depression, mean (SD) | 11.3 (2.8) | 11.7 (11.9) | .64 | 11.2 (2.9) | 11.9 (1.9) | .30 |
| CGAS, mean (SD) | 48.4 (11.1) | 47.9 (11.2) | .86 | 48.9 (11.2) | 46.3 (10.3) | .32 |
| No. of comorbid diagnoses, mean (SD) | 1.6 (1.2) | 1.6 (1.2) | .94 | 1.6 (1.2) | 1.7 (1.0) | .84 |

Note: BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; CDRS-R = Children's Depression Rating Scale-Revised; CGAS = Children's Global Assessment Scale.

^a*N*'s vary from 116 to 124 because of missing data. ^bSuicide attempt: an act of self-injurious behavior with an inferred or explicit wish to die. ^cSuicidal event: completed suicide, attempted suicide, preparatory behavior toward an imminent attempt, or suicidal ideation. ^dAttempt $t_{115} = 1.67$; event $t_{116} = 2.53$. ^eAttempt $t_{15,6} = 2.36$; event $t_{122} = 2.94$. ^fAttempt $t_{25,3} = 2.66$; event $t_{120} = 2.28$. ^gAttempt $t_{116} = 3.39$; event $t_{116} = 4.12$.

aggression, impulsivity, and emotionality were not associated with the occurrence of a suicidal event (Table 4).

Family-Environmental Characteristics

Family constellation at home did not predict the occurrence of an event. A history of reported sexual abuse was associated with a higher risk and earlier onset of an event (log-rank $\chi^2 = 5.71$, $p < .02$). A reported history of physical abuse was also associated with an increased risk and earlier occurrence of an attempt (Log-rank $\chi^2 = 6.31$, $p = .01$). High self-rated family adaptability and cohesion were protective against the occurrence of an event (Table 4).

Impact of Treatment on Treatment Targets and Outcome

The impact of intervention on baseline predictors of outcome that were treatment targets was examined by conducting a series of random effects regressions, testing for the main effects of time, event status, and event status by time interactions for each treatment target. Effects for time and event status were found in regressions that focused on the Beck Depression Inventory, SSI, Clinical Global Impressions-Severity, Children's Global Assessment Scale, Multidimensional Anxiety Scale, family cohesion, and family adaptability, mean-

ing that these measures of symptoms and functioning improved over time and were higher at intake in those who eventually experienced an event. Event-time interactions were found for the SSI with regard to events ($F_{1,377} = 4.40$, $p = .037$) and the Children's Global Assessment Scale with regard to attempts ($F_{1,352} = 5.74$, $p = .017$); Figs. 3 and 4). These results mean that those participants who experienced a suicidal event had a slower decline in suicidal ideation than those who did not, whereas those who made a suicide attempt showed slower improvement in their functional status.

Logistic Regression

The most parsimonious set of predictors of an event were higher parental income (odds ratio [OR] 2.6, 95% confidence interval [CI] 1.03–6.8), site (OR 4.5, 95% CI 1.1–18.5), a history of sexual abuse (OR 18.2, 95% CI 2.5–130.6), and lower lethality of previous attempts (OR 0.5, 95% CI 0.3–0.9).

Time to Event

Predictors of earlier time to onset of a suicidal event, using Cox regression were as follows: higher income (OR 2.2, 95% CI 1.0–4.7), white race (OR 2.6, 95% CI 1.1–5.0), site (OR 4.6, 95% CI 1.4–15.4), the

TABLE 4
Psychological and Family-Environmental Characteristics and Suicidal Behavior^a

| | Suicide Attempts ^b | | | Suicidal Events ^c | | |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------|----------|------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| | No | Yes | <i>p</i> | No | Yes | <i>p</i> |
| | <i>n</i> = 109 | <i>n</i> = 15 | | <i>n</i> = 100 | <i>n</i> = 24 | |
| Aggression, mean (SD) | 88.3 (24.4) | 101.4 (29.2) | <.07 | 89.0 (24.7) | 93.2 (27.5) | .48 |
| EASI-Emotion, mean (SD) | 45.2 (9.4) | 49.5 (9.2) | .10 | 45.1 (9.7) | 48.1 (8.2) | .19 |
| EASI-Impulsivity, mean (SD) | 62.9 (10.6) | 64.6 (8.5) | .56 | 63.0 (10.6) | 63.4 (9.7) | .88 |
| No. of borderline symptoms, ^d mean (SD) | 1.6 (2) | 2.5 (2.3) | .11 | 1.6 (2.0) | 2.5 (2.3) | .05 |
| Hopelessness, ^e mean (SD) | 8.9 (6) | 13.7 (5) | .008 | 8.8 (6.0) | 12.6 (5.5) | .008 |
| MASC, ^f mean (SD) | 45.5 (19.4) | 53.8 (10.7) | .10 | 44.3 (17.7) | 55.2 (16.4) | .009 |
| Lives with both biological parents, <i>n</i> (%) | 46 (42.2) | 8 (53.3) | .42 | 40 (40.0) | 14 (58.3) | .10 |
| FACES-Adaptability, ^g mean (SD) | 39.6 (8.6) | 32.8 (7.9) | .006 | 39.6 (8.6) | 35.3 (8.6) | .03 |
| FACES-Cohesion, ^h mean (SD) | 48.6 (12) | 37.4 (7.9) | <.001 | 48.7 (12.3) | 41.1 (9.5) | .006 |
| Sexual abuse, ⁱ <i>n</i> (%) | 17 (16.7) | 5 (35.7) | .09 | 14 (15.1) | 8 (34.8) | .03 |
| Physical abuse, ^j <i>n</i> (%) | 11 (10.8) | 5 (35.7) | .01 | 11 (11.8) | 5 (21.7) | .21 |

Note: EASI = Emotionality, Adaptability, Sociability, and Impulsivity; FACES = Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale; MASC = Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children.

^a*N*'s vary from 116 to 124 because of missing data. ^bSuicide attempt: an act of self-injurious behavior with an inferred or explicit wish to die. ^cSuicidal event: Completed suicide, attempted suicide, preparatory behavior toward an imminent attempt, or suicidal ideation. ^dAttempt $t_{122} = 1.62$; event $t_{122} = 1.95$. ^eAttempt $t_{115} = 2.71$, event $t_{116} = 2.69$. ^fEvent $t_{116} = 2.68$. ^gAttempt $t_{116} = 2.80$; event $t_{115} = 2.79$. ^hAttempt $t_{116} = 4.59$; event $t_{115} = 2.17$. ⁱEvent $\chi^2_1 = 4.67$. ^jAttempt $\chi^2_1 = 6.43$.

number of previous suicide attempts (OR 1.5, 95% CI 1.1–1.9), and reported history of sexual abuse (OR 4.4, 95% CI 1.1–18.0). Both lower maximum lethality of previous attempt (OR 0.6, 95% CI 0.4–0.96) and higher family cohesion were protective against the occurrence of an event (OR 0.94, 95% CI 0.7–1.0).

Type of Treatment and Outcome

While the majority of youths received a combination of medication and psychotherapy ($n = 93$), 31 participants were in one of the monotherapy groups, either

pharmacotherapy ($n = 14$) or CBT ($n = 17$). The rate of suicidal events was higher in the combination group (23.7% [22/93] versus 6.5% [2/31]; Fisher, $p < .04$). However, those participants who received combination treatment were in a higher risk category for repeated suicide events because they showed higher interview and self-rated depression scores, higher hopelessness, greater number of previous attempts, a higher rate of psychiatric hospitalization in the 6 months before treatment, and lower levels of functioning. Logistic regression was conducted to evaluate the relation between monotherapy versus combined therapy, and after controlling for these

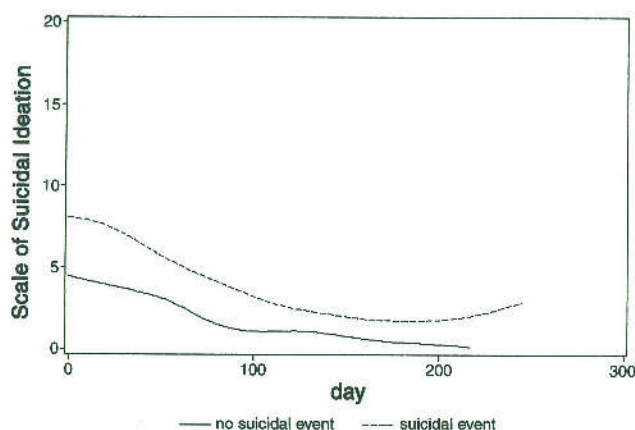


Fig. 3 Mean SSI by suicidal event group. SSI = Scale of Suicide Ideation.

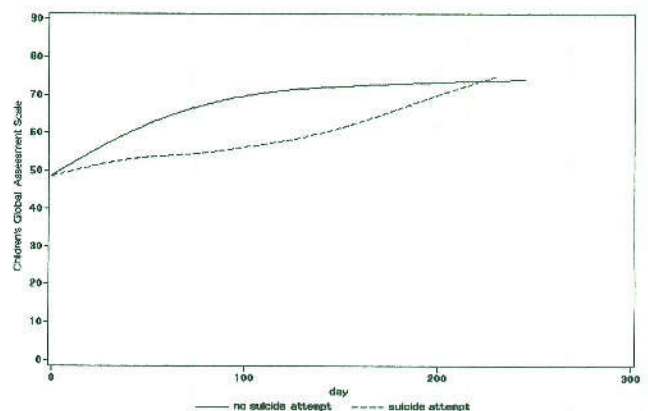


Fig. 4 Mean CGAS by suicide attempt group. CGAS = Children's Global Assessment Scale.

baseline differences, there was no differential effect of treatment type on suicidal outcomes.

DISCUSSION

In this open feasibility treatment study of adolescent suicide attempters with depression, strong clinical predictors of experiencing a suicidal event were high levels of suicidal ideation and self-reported depression, a history of maltreatment, two or more previous attempts, lower lethality of the index attempt, and lower levels of family cohesion. When participants showed a slower reduction in suicidal ideation, they were also more vulnerable to experiencing a suicidal event. Similar but not identical factors predicted a reattempt. The hazard of an event and attempt during 6 months after intake was 0.19 and 0.12, respectively, with a median time to an event or attempt of approximately 6 weeks. Approximately 40% of events occurred within 4 weeks of entrance into the study. The research and clinical implications of this study will be discussed after putting them in the context of its limitations and strengths.

Because this study was in large part a nonrandomized trial in which the participants chose their treatment, we cannot address questions of the efficacy of our intervention or its component parts. On the other hand, because our sample received relatively standard and similar treatments, our assessment of predictors for reattempt and for suicidal events may be more clinically meaningful than those in most naturalistic longitudinal studies, in which participants may receive interventions of varying intensity and quality. We also are limited by the relatively small number of participants, events, and attempts, although homogeneity in entry and outcome criteria does allow us to draw some conclusions about adolescent suicide attempters with depression. Although we endeavored to cover relevant domains to suicide risk in our assessment, we have relatively little specific information about some salient domains, such as details about maltreatment, intercurrent stressful life events, and strategies of emotion regulation.^{1,3,4,8} Finally, significant site effects emerged that could be due to differences either in some of the above-noted characteristics or in the implementation of treatment.

Nevertheless, this study has some unique characteristics, despite the above-noted limitations. We engaged a difficult-to-treat population, the characteristics of which usually lead to exclusion from clinical trials, with a relatively high rate of follow-up. Although we cannot

determine whether the treatment is efficacious, we can identify predictors of response that should be able to guide future treatment development.

Our sample, treated for 6 months, had hazards of experiencing a suicidal event or a suicide attempt of 0.19 and 0.12, respectively, with a median time to a suicidal event of approximately 44 days. In one 6-month follow-up study of hospitalized adolescents, the hazards of reattempt in adolescents admitted for an attempt or for significant suicidal ideation were 0.17 and 0.27, respectively.⁶ The 6-month hazard of suicidal events in those inpatients with depression with a history of either suicidal ideation with a plan or an attempt was 0.69 (SE 0.15). In a reanalysis of 5-year follow-up of formerly hospitalized adolescents by Goldston et al.,⁷ the hazard of a reattempt at 6 months and 1 year after hospital discharge for those with a history of at least one previous attempt and a mood disorder were 0.20 and 0.30, respectively (D. Goldston, personal communication, 2008). Our results, in a comparable sample, many of whom had recently been discharged from the hospital, compare favorably with the outcome for both of these samples. This was true even for the highest risk group that received combination treatment, with a 6-month rate of events of 23.6%. Although such comparisons are promising, they only suggest that our intervention may be helpful in reducing risk for recurrent suicidal behavior.

On the other hand, 10 of the 24 suicidal events occurred within 4 weeks of intake into treatment, meaning that many events occurred before a time when an adequate "dose" of psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy could be delivered. The early timing of these events, which has been reported in other similar samples, suggests the importance of front-loaded intervention strategies that are most likely to reduce risk for recurrent suicidal behavior, through a careful elaboration of a safety plan and coping strategies for likely precipitants for suicidal behavior.³⁴

Our findings that high self-reported depression, high ideation at the beginning of treatment, high hopelessness, and a history of multiple attempts predicted a suicidal event are consistent with other reports.^{1,6,7,34,35} Unlike other studies, we did not find that comorbid disruptive disorders were related to increased risk for attempt, perhaps because participants with significant conduct symptoms that could not be managed in the context of the treatment were excluded.^{1,4} Self-rated

depression was a much stronger predictor of reattempt and occurrence of an event than interview-rated depression, perhaps because this gap between self-report and interview may be indicative of poor distress tolerance and impaired emotion regulation.³⁶

Our finding of an association between child maltreatment and risk for recurrent suicidal behavior has previously been well documented.^{1,4} Collectively, these results reinforce the importance of the assessment and management of trauma and the salience of a safe environment for the suicidal child.

Conversely, higher family cohesion and adaptability were protective against future events. Other studies have found that positive relationships with a parent, parental monitoring and supervision, a positive connection with school, and a prosocial peer group were protective against the occurrence of suicide attempts, even in the face of other risk factors, including abuse.^{3,37} Enhancement of positive parenting and adaptive family coping may be useful in preventing reattempts.

Some of the findings were unexpected. In many studies, ethnic minority status and economic distress are predictors of suicidal ideation and behavior,³⁸ whereas in this cohort, higher income and white race were associated with earlier time to a suicidal event. Although these results persisted after controlling for site, it is possible that these associations may be a function of differences in site ethnic makeup and performance. The sites with the highest proportion of white participants had the highest rates of suicidal events. Those with lower income were more likely to be lost to follow-up, which may have contributed to an underestimation of the rate of suicidal events in that subgroup. The association between lower lethality of suicide attempts and recurrent suicidal behavior is also counterintuitive, but those who have engaged in multiple suicide attempts tend to make more impulsive attempts, which, in other studies, have been shown to be inversely correlated with lethality.^{35,39}

These findings confirm that youths with depression and a history of a suicide attempt are at high risk for recurrent suicidal behavior. Salient therapeutic targets may include the development of distress tolerance and improved emotion regulation, targeting the residua of childhood trauma and enhancement of protective elements in family, school, and social environments. Although this is primarily an open study of the impact of intensive and specialized pharmacological and/or psychotherapeutic treatment, the observed reattempt

and suicide event hazard rates compare favorably with reports in the literature in similar samples, suggesting a potential therapeutic benefit for these interventions. Because a significant proportion of suicidal events tended to cluster shortly after intake, before the benefit of any of these interventions may be evident, an emphasis on safety planning and on increasing the intensity of the therapeutic contact early in treatment may be warranted.

Disclosure: Dr. Greenhill was a consultant to Pfizer and served as chairman of Data Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB) for pediatric ziprasidone trials; received research grants from NIMH, Otsuka/Bristol-Myers Squibb, and Johnson & Johnson. Dr. Emslie received research support from Biobehavioral Diagnostics, Forest Laboratories, Shire, and Somerset; has been a consultant to Biobehavioral Diagnostics, Eli Lilly & Company, Forest Laboratories, Pfizer, Shire, Validus Pharmaceuticals, and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. Dr. Bukstein has consulted to Quintiles CME; has served on the speakers' bureau of Quintiles CME; has received research and/or education funding from Shire Pharmaceuticals, Ortho-McNeil Janssen, and Quintiles; and has received book royalties from Routledge. Dr. Walkup receives research support from the NIH, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the Tourette Syndrome Association. He received free medication and placebo from Eli Lilly & Company, and Pfizer and free medication from Abbott for NIMH-funded clinical trials. He has received honoraria from Eli Lilly & Company, in 2006 and from Pfizer in 2003 and 2005 and from the Tourette Syndrome Association in 2007–2008. He also provided consultation to defense council on behalf of GlaxoSmithKline (Paxil) in 2007. Dr. Coffey has received research support from the NIMH, Boehringer Ingelheim, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Novartis, and Tourette Syndrome Association and has been an advisor to Novartis and Jazz Pharmaceuticals. Dr. Posner has received research support only from the following pharmaceutical companies as part of an effort to help execute the FDA suicidality mandates/requests: Amgen, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, Forest Laboratories, GlaxoSmithKline, i3 Research, Eli Lilly & Company, Johnson & Johnson, H. Lundbeck A/S, Medtronic, Merck & Co, Next Wave Pharmaceuticals, Novo Nordisk A/S, Orexigen Therapeutics, Otsuka Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer, Roche, Sanofi-Aventis, Schering-Plough Corporation, Schwarz Biosciences/UCB, Sepracor, Takeda Pharmaceutical Company, Valeant Pharmaceuticals, Vivus, and Wyeth Research. Dr. March receives research support from the NIMH and National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression (NARSAD); is a consultant or scientific advisor to Pfizer, Eli Lilly & Company, Wyeth, GlaxoSmithKline, and MedAvante; receives research support from Pfizer and Eli Lilly & Company; has equity holdings in MedAvante; receives study drug for NIMH-funded studies from Eli Lilly & Company, and Pfizer. Dr. Riddle receives research funding from the NIMH, has served as a DSMB member for National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) and Johnson & Johnson, and has been a consultant/scientific advisor to Shire and Jazz Pharmaceuticals. Dr. Turner receives research support from the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Wagner held stock in Johnson & Johnson in an amount deemed by government-wide regulations not to create a conflict of interest, and has since divested. Drs. Curry and Wells receive speaking fees from the REACH Institute. The other authors report no conflicts of interest.

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TITLE: The Treatment of Adolescent Suicide Attempters Study
(TASA): Predictors of Suicidal Events in an Open
Treatment Trial

SOURCE: J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry 48 no10 O 2009

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